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Speakes confirms Sandinista arms increase

By Roger Fontaine
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The White House confirmed yesterday that Soviets have recently increased arms aid to Nicaragua as reported by The Washington Times yesterday.

Spokesman Larry Speakes told reporters in a morning briefing that U.S. intelligence had uncovered "a serious increase in the amount of armament being provided to the Sandinista government" in the "the last month or so." In a later briefing, however, he declined to give any specifics on what the reconnaissance photos taken by an SR-71 spy plane Thursday night revealed.

"The Nicaraguan government is carrying on a military buildup that is far in excess of all its neighbors combined and far in excess of any defensive needs," Mr. Speakes said.

Mr. Speakes also noted that the intended shipment to Nicaragua "coincides with the Sandinista government's crackdown on civil liberties and a military offensive against the democratic resistance in Nicaragua."

State Department spokesman Charles Redman also noted yesterday "a significant increase in Soviet arms shipments to Nicaragua, many of which are transshipped through Cuba," but hinted that such transshipments are nothing new.

"I think it has been established in fact that Cuba has been a staging point for Soviet and other bloc arms shipments for quite some time," he said.

Other officials have said that although Cuba has served as a transfer point for arms destined elsewhere, Soviet bloc vessels in the past have delivered heavy arms directly to Nicaraguan ports without using the intermediary Nicaraguan freighters.

U.S. officials contacted by The Times indicated that the new shipments were part of a recent increase in Soviet heavy arms assistance to Nicaragua after ending such deliveries late last year. With the exception of tanks, however, they could not identify any other type of weapon in the current shipment.

In early November 1984, a Soviet freighter at Nicaragua's Pacific port of Corinto was thought to be carrying MiG aircraft among other arms.

Direct deliveries of Soviet heavy arms apparently stopped in the glare of that highly publicized stop-over, although shipments of ammunition and other equipment continued.

[The Associated Press, quoting unidentified U.S. officials, reported reconnaissance photos revealed that 35 to 40 Soviet T54 and T55 medium tanks and other military equipment have arrived at the Cuban port of Mariel.

[The equipment was transported by a Soviet freighter and a second vessel thought to be Bulgarian, the AP reported, adding that the cargo from both ships was being loaded onto a Nicaraguan freighter.

[The AP also quoted U.S. officials as saying that surface-to-air missiles had been fired during the flight of the SR-71, but that the plane was not the target.]

Mr. Speakes refused to identify the weapons in the arms shipment or confirm that the SR-71 reconnaissance plane that photographed the equipment in Mariel had been fired on by Soviet-built SAMs.

The SR-71 returned safely Thursday night to Beale Air Force Base, home of the Ninth Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, located approximately 60 miles north of Sacramento, Calif.

The SR-71 can fly more than 2,000 miles per hour at an altitude of more than 80,000 feet.

One State Department official said yesterday that the arms have not yet been sent to Nicaragua, and the two Nicaraguan coastal freighters remain in Cuban waters.

Another State Department official who declined to be identified also said that the SR-71 reconnaissance flight was meant to show the Soviets "we were not backing down in any way" at a time when Soviet and U.S. officials were discussing Central America in Washington.

Those meetings, which were held Thursday and Friday last week, were part of a series of Soviet-American exchanges on regional problems. Although the Russians did not mention the SR-71 flight, one U.S. participant called the discussions "totally unproductive" with the Soviets acting "very nasty" during the meetings.

Previous talks have centered on the Middle East, East Asia and Afghanistan.